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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [KN](#) [KS](#)
SUBJECT: PARK GEUN-HYE AND GNP LEGISLATORS ON BEEF
CONTROVERSY, DOMESTIC POLITICS AND NEC

Classified By: Amb. Alexander Vershbow. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Over lunch with Grand National Party (GNP) leader Park Geun-hye, the Ambassador discussed the current controversy over the re-opening of the Korean market to U.S. beef and made the strong case that U.S. beef was safe, telling Park that we rely on leaders like her to calm the situation. The Ambassador noted that he was disappointed with Park's remarks the previous day that called the ROKG attitude on beef "problematic," and that the government should have made it clear that public health and safety are its top priorities. Park defended her remarks, saying that while she believed U.S. beef was safe to eat, the Lee government had not adequately educated Korean consumers. Park, who seemed reluctant to talk about domestic politics, expressed her disappointment in the GNP leadership for preventing her supporters from returning to the party and possibly forcing them to form a negotiating bloc in the National Assembly. Representative Jin Young, also in attendance, discussed the Embassy relocation, noting that he did not expect a new Embassy could be built in his district of Yongsan, but instead thought the Kyunggi Girls School site would be more appropriate. The lawmakers also discussed prospects for the KORUS FTA and North Korea. End Summary.

BEEF

¶2. (C) The Ambassador told Park Geun-hye he was disappointed by her May 6 statement that renegotiation of the April 18 agreement to reopen the Korean market to U.S. beef, if necessary, could be an option. Facts and science should be the guideline for any discussion of beef; if the beef issue continued to be treated as a political football and reacted to emotionally, it could damage U.S.-ROK relations. Park explained that the Korean people were not against U.S. beef since U.S. beef was imported to Korea in the past. The concern was that in the negotiating process, the ROKG had not acted in a prudent fashion and did not show enough concern for the health and safety of the Korean people.

¶3. (C) Koreans, like most people, Park explained, do not like to be told what to do. Rather than seek consensus and support for the agreement to reopen the Korean market to U.S. beef, the ROKG struck the agreement with the U.S. and told Koreans after the fact. She admitted that spreading false

rumors about U.S. beef was dangerous and unhelpful. The GNP, which was against the importation of bone-in beef just several months ago, changed its position with no attempt to explain to the Korean people why. The GNP and the ROKG had a responsibility to explain this change in approach, and the lack of such an explanation contributed to people's unease.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador explained that U.S. beef exporters removed all SRM from all cows and instituted rules to regulate the type of feed that cows could eat in 1997. People have been misinformed, the Ambassador said. Since these rules went into place, BSE has been under control in the U.S. Of the 350 million cows born in the U.S. since 1997, none had been detected with BSE. The U.S. hoped to make passage of the FTA possible in the U.S. in 2008 and a quick resolution of the beef issue would contribute to this process. There were additional time constraints as negotiations to reopen the beef market could not begin before the April 9 National Assembly elections. Therefore, there was just a narrow window for the negotiation after the elections and before Lee's visit to the U.S. In the past, some in the U.S. thought that Korea was not reliable on trade, and the Ambassador said he was concerned that if the ROK asked for a renegotiation or cancelled the agreement, many would lose the trust that had been built up in recent months. The U.S. was willing to allow more ROK inspectors or make other gestures to help the ROKG in ensuring the agreement would survive.

¶5. (C) Park said that she supported the KORUS FTA and still hoped that, despite the recent problems over beef, the FTA would pass the National Assembly in Korea. With beef, the

most important thing was what the Korean people think, and the clear dissatisfaction of the Korean people had to be addressed. Further, Park said, the majority of the protestors and those participating in candle-light vigils were not left-wing activists. Granted, the left-wing element was using the beef issue to their own political gain, but the overriding concern of the protestors was not political, but with "well-being" and protecting their health. There are students and mothers who are demonstrating because they are concerned U.S. beef could be bad for their health or for the health of their children.

¶6. (C) Park said it was good to tell people there had been no cases of BSE in the past, but the agreement stipulates that even if there is a case in the U.S., Korea has to continue to accept shipments of beef until the situation was resolved through various procedures, which would take time. This caused people to be furious. If there are no U.S. cows born since 1997 with BSE, why not add a clause in the agreement to allow Korea to suspend shipments in the unlikely event that a case of BSE were unearthed? The Ambassador refuted this, saying that even if a case of BSE was discovered there might not be scientific reasons to halt shipment, because the cow would be prevented from entering the food supply under the current protocol. This effectively removed any chance diseased meat would be exported.

¶7. (C) The Ambassador noted that all future agreements with China, Taiwan and Japan would have to be the same as the agreement with the ROK. There are 95 countries that now import U.S. beef under the same conditions which the ROK agreed upon. Park said that the Lee government has a responsibility to resolve the issue with the people. The Ambassador agreed and added that everyone had to help the government to bring some rationality and honesty to the conversation. Park said she had always maintained rationality in her approach to this and other issues and would continue to do so; her main goal was to protect the Korean people.

¶8. (C) Newly-elected lawmaker Gu Sang-chan said that the dissatisfaction over beef was because people had many problems with President Lee and they simply chose beef to manifest their disaffection with the newly-minted leader. The Ambassador said it was fine to criticize President Lee

but it was not acceptable to say that people will die if they eat U.S. beef.

NORTH KOREA

¶9. (C) Park said that North Korea was not really a political issue at the moment. If President Lee lost people's trust, however, no matter what Lee does or what his policy stance was it could cause problems on the Peninsula.

EMBASSY RELOCATION

¶10. (C) Representing Yongsan district (the site of USFK headquarters and the future site of the U.S. Embassy), recently re-elected lawmaker Jin Young said it would be very difficult for the U.S. Embassy to be built anywhere on the military base in Yongsan. Jin had proposed and passed a law in June 2007 that said no buildings were allowed anywhere on Main or South Posts. He said this law was not because the U.S. Embassy was not welcome in his district; it was. Instead, he wrote the law to protect the base from encroachment by the ROK Ministry of National Defense (MND) and other entities that wanted to slice up the base. He intended to make all of Yongsan garrison into a park. Rep. Jin asserted that the MOU between the U.S. and the ROK allowing the U.S. Embassy to be built on a portion of the base did not take precedent over the law he authored. Several days ago, Jin brought this up with Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan during a hearing at the National Assembly, and the two agreed the law posed difficulties. If the embassy

could not be built in Yongsan, the logical option would be to build the new Embassy on the site of Kyunggi Girls School (the site previously agreed in the 1990's, until the ROK cancelled the deal in 2004). The location, in central Seoul, was a much more appropriate site for the U.S. Embassy, Jin said.

DOMESTIC POLITICS

¶11. (C) The Ambassador asked if Pro-Park Alliance (PPA) lawmakers or pro-Park independents would be allowed back into the ruling GNP and asked if there was any real dialogue between Park and President Lee. Park said there was currently no dialogue between her and Lee and, while allowing there could be some dialogue in the future, did not sound sanguine. Park said that some in the GNP worried that, if the independents and PPA lawmakers were allowed back into the party, Park would form a faction within the GNP and either lead the party herself or support someone to be party chairman from her group. Therefore, GNP leadership was blocking the reentry of her supporters to the GNP. Park said she had recently announced that she would not run for the party chairmanship, so she thought that this would have solved the issue. In fact, voters selected those who failed to receive GNP nominations and ran outside the party because the nomination selection process was flawed. It seemed natural that those who shared the same policy stance as the GNP and were rightly elected should rejoin the GNP. If the GNP says that these lawmakers cannot join now, there is no justification to bring them back to the party after the GNP convention in July. If there is no progress on this issue, the PPA and independents will have no choice but to form a negotiating group.

LEE-BUSH SUMMIT

¶12. (C) In response to Park's questions about how the President Bush-Lee summit went, the Ambassador said that there was an immediate personal connection between the two

leaders and they both realized they shared the same perspective on a variety of topics, from the alliance to Kim Jong-il. The warm atmosphere of the summit was particularly welcome after several cold summits with former President Roh Moo-hyun. The Ambassador said that Bush read a lot about what Lee thought about North Korea, human rights, trade and other issues and was ready to welcome Lee. Bush was also impressed with Lee's fulfillment of his promise to reopen the Korean market to U.S. beef. Roh had made that promise as well, but did not follow through. To top it off, the two presidents' personal styles and personalities are similar and all of this contributed to a successful summit.

¶13. (C) Beyond the personal rapport the two leaders built, the summit improved relations in a concrete way. One decision that came from the summit was to freeze troop levels in the ROK at 28,500 for the foreseeable future. This decision was made not only because of the continued threat that North Korea posed, but also to assure the Korean people that the decision to transfer wartime operational control (OPCON) was not the first step toward the withdrawal of U.S. forces, but that in fact the U.S. commitment to Korea's security was ongoing. The two agreed that the alliance should be broadened into a global and regional strategic partnership. Lee seemed to agree that continued non-military contributions by the ROK in Afghanistan made sense. There was no list of demands that President Bush presented, contrary to what some ROK newspapers had written.

FTA PROCESS

¶14. (C) Representative Jin, the ranking member of the Foreign Affairs and Trade Committee, said that there was not much hope the KORUS FTA would pass during the special session that will end May 24. First, there would be a hearing May 13-14 about the FTA. After that, the law will go to the law review sub-committee. From there, the FTA had one day -- May 19 -- to go before the plenary for a vote. Jin noted he chaired the review sub-committee so that step would be perfunctory; but, in order for the FTA bill to pass, there could be no delays, which was unlikely. UDP lawmakers were hoping to exchange renegotiation on beef for passage of the FTA. They also attempted to leverage support for an inter-Korean Prime Minister-level summit from the GNP, but Jin said he had stopped that request cold.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Park Geun-hye's relations with Lee Myung-bak are still rocky; the public spat between the two shows no signs of abating -- it is as if the fight for the GNP candidacy is still ongoing. The lines are clearly drawn; Jin and Gu are clearly with Park. Reflecting this, the two did not have kind words for Lee's recent performance.
VERSHBOW